Political Ideas and 'Real' Politics

How important are political ideas for understanding 'real' politics? Among political historians, the whole spectrum of answers has been proposed. At one extreme, it seems, are those who have stressed the centrality of ideas: for instance, that the influence of Locke, Smith, and Bentham can be traced, sooner or later, into the practice of routine politics. At the other extreme, and in resistance to this, are those who see politics in a realist vein: interest and power are, within and between states, the determining factors in political life, with ideas little more than, at best, a rhetorical flourish. Clearly, part of the difficulty resides in what is meant by political *ideas*. Typically, historians of ideas still tend to refer to what might be called upper-case 'I' ideas – the arguments of a relatively restricted canon of sophisticated political theorists. But there are also what we might call lower-case 'i' ideas – the sorts of beliefs held by all manner of everyday actors which constitute their understanding of the political world and which will affect their actions in relation to it (Macintyre, 1983). There is, of course, no clear-cut distinction between the two, nor any necessary reason to suppose that a canonical thinker was recognised as such in their own time.

A strength of the work of Bevir and Rhodes is that they – separately and collectively – take small 'i' ideas seriously. Because of their commitment to what they call 'situated agency' they recognise the centrality of the beliefs and desires of individual agents even as they locate these within broader traditions. Because of their commitment to antiessentialism, but in the form of pragmatic realism (Bevir, 2010: 60-1), they do not instantiate a dichotomy between ideas and reality – in Charles Taylor's words 'ideas always come wrapped up in certain forms of practices' (Taylor, 2004: 33). Since *Interpreting British Governance* was published in 2003 they have sought to apply these arguments to the understanding of modern governance. Bevir (2005; 2010) has shown how the arguments and assumptions of different styles of social science – first rational choice and then new institutionalism – have shaped new patterns of governance and brought new ideological *and* practical dilemmas to the fore. His concern is primarily to trace the intellectual traditions underpinning and shaping contemporary practice. Rhodes (2011), meanwhile, has applied an ethnographic approach: by observing the everyday lives of ministers and permanent secretaries in three government departments he is able to show how the routines and rituals of a wide variety of actors – the role of the diary secretary, for instance, is stressed – make an institution work, in good times and in bad.

No doubt most political scientists will primarily be interested in what this can tell us about governance. Here, though, I want to approach the question of the interpretive approach to politics by a different route, and to begin by stressing the centrality of the history of ideas as a subfield. Bevir's training was as an intellectual historian: his 1989 DPhil explored 'British Socialist Thought, 1880-1900', and in the 1990s he published a number of articles on nineteenth century social and political thought. Indeed, this interest has never disappeared, as various publications throughout the 2000s show – not least his 2011 *Making of British Socialism*. Dissatisfied with the prevailing methodologies of this subfield, Bevir also spent the 1990s developing his own philosophical approach which appeared as *The Logic of the History of Ideas* in 1999. Even though some of the terms and arguments have been refined, the centrality of this book to the subsequent work of Bevir and Rhodes cannot be exaggerated – it sits behind everything. Its title, however, does not do justice to its ambition. Bevir was not just interested in the history of ideas as a way to understand canonical thinkers but in its potential to situate the beliefs and desires of *all* agents in a meaningful context, and to use this to understand their behaviour. Hence, as Melissa Lane noted, his concern was not so much 'large "I" ideas' as 'small "I" ideas' (Lane, 2002: 34).

Both Bevir and Rhodes want to use their interpretive approach as a means of rethinking the practice of political science. In part they do this through philosophical engagement with alternative epistemologies and methodologies, but they also stress the importance of disciplinary genealogies. In *Modern Political Science* (Adcock et al, 2007) they and their collaborators examine the historical development of their discipline, showing the different routes taken by Anglo-American political science over the last century, from the eclipse of developmental historicism, through empiricist modernism, to the emergence of new institutionalism. The radical historicism outlined in the *Logic* shapes their approach, but they also argue that such histories are important to contemporary political science – they undermine caricatures of past scholarship and recapture lost insights, they can help us refine the concepts in current use and clarify the beliefs we study. Crucially, radical historicism 'undermines the assumptions of the natural, progressive, or disinterested character of the development of political science and the institutions that it informs and by which it is informed' (Adcock, et al, 2007: 15) and enables us to evaluate alternative approaches. The history of political science is therefore part of the subject of political science.

This chapter aims to contribute to the task of exploring the history of political science, and in particular its relationship to political thought and political history. In an earlier essay (Craig, 2010) I tried to show how an influential style of 'high political' history – the 'Peterhouse School' of Maurice Cowling – could be understood in a more anthropological light, and that, as a result, could be seen as a part of a broad tradition to which Bevir and Rhodes belong. Indeed, Cowling's *Nature and Limits of Political Science* has made fleeting appearances in their work (Bevir and Rhodes, 1999: 233; 2003: 43). Here, I want to look at a strand of development taken by the 'Cambridge School' of the history of political thought. While the influence of Quentin Skinner is well understood, that of John Dunn is rather less so. This is relevant to Bevir's work: while he disagrees with Skinner's methodology, his *Logic* nevertheless emerges out of close engagement with the arguments of the 'Cambridge School'. There is an affinity between them. But while Skinner has largely remained concerned with the history of ideas, Dunn's significance arises from his more direct interest in the way that hermeneutic approaches can be applied to political science and the explanatory challenges they raise. Yet, despite the potential synergies between Bevir and Dunn, the latter has made only the most cursory of appearances in the former's work. In what follows I trace the development of Dunn's thinking – an exercise in intellectual history – to show how his interpretive commitments have posed important questions about the nature of explanation in the social sciences and about the irreducibility of political judgment, and how these underpin a particular style of 'realism' in recent political theory.

John Dunn, Political Thought, and Political Science

Dunn's first book on *The Political Thought of John Locke* was published in 1969, and was quickly championed as a manifesto for a new style of contextualised history of political thought. Certainly, it was written in reaction to two dominant styles of interpretation at that time. On the one hand were the philosophers who tended to view the historical specificity of texts with 'massive indifference' and instead found them stimulating largely according to contemporary concerns – the danger here was anachronism (Dunn, 1996: 19). On the other hand were those historians – especially Marxists – who explained the significance of a text by reference to the social relations of the period, as if the author's expressed intentions were of little concern. But Dunn's interest was not just to restore the historical identity to an argument

from the past – indeed this might be seen as a 'trivial' ambition – but to encourage recognition that the philosophical and historical approaches were 'logically indispensable complements' (Dunn, 1969: 208). What, he later explained, he was groping for was something like Quine's holism – an understanding of the internal connections and relations of a person's thinking (Dunn, 1990: 10).

The groping can first be seen in an influential article of the preceding year. Dunn wanted to bring into harmony the two approaches just mentioned, namely a satisfactory philosophical account of an individual's ideas *and* an adequate historical account of them. The objections made to typical histories of philosophy are now familiar. They were histories of 'fictions': rational constructions were squeezed into formal articulations which could not have historically been possible (1980: 15). These histories only focused on one of two necessary things – 'the set of argued propositions in the past which discuss how the political world is and ought to be and what should constitute the criteria for proper action within it' (1980: 20). The defenders of these histories were concerned only with the coherence of a set of propositions, and with commenting on the status of this coherence in relation to contemporary criteria of rationality. Hence, Dunn argued, the central concern was the truth or falsity of what the philosopher being studied had maintained. This style of explanation was therefore 'rational'. Dunn was not opposed to this as such – after all, a part of understanding why, for instance, Plato criticised Thrasymachus's conception of justice will require unearthing the premises which made the arguments seem cogent (1980: 16). His own work on Locke tried to restore as much coherence as possible to what Locke maintained (Dunn, 1969: xi). But, he argued, this was not enough – we also needed an explanation of *why* Locke – or anyone else – maintained what he did. The philosophical histories were bloodless – they were histories with 'breathing, excreting, hating, mocking' left out (Dunn, 1980: 20). Thinking was an activity and its history was a history of people struggling to make sense of their experiences. Hence, the history of thought needed to consider the actions which were being engaged in when statements were made – propositions had a place in the real world and statements were made by real speakers (1980: 20, 21). It was in this regard that Dunn's engagement with Austin's speech-act theory was at its strongest[1] – one cannot always know

[1] Although Skinner's owed his introduction to Austin's speech act theory to Dunn, and was to make substantial use of it in his various methodological writings, Dunn himself made no further explicit reference to Austin after this essay.

what someone meant *unless* one knew what someone was doing, as, for example, in understanding cases of irony or parody.[2] In these senses, then, there was a 'causal' approach to the history of thought. That said, Dunn did not want to push this aspect too far – the error of those who saw ideas as simply the expression of social relations. While there might be room to explain *some* aspects of a text as the ideological expression of a group, this could never explain *all* its aspects – the *Republic* might in part have been written as an apologia for the declining Athenian elite, but that could not explain *all* of what Plato wrote.

Dunn's aim was not so much to establish a new school of the history of political thought as to consider the relationship between intellectual and social history – and, as we shall see, his thinking had implications for *both* types of history. He was interested in the philosophy of explanation, and cited Collingwood, Gardiner, Dray, Gallie, Danto, Kuhn and Gombrich as particular influences. But he was unwilling to declare a side in the 'venerable dispute' between idealist and positivist philosophies of history (1980: 17). He did not think all potentially explanatory questions were of a piece. To ask why Plato criticised Thrasymachus's conception of justice, or why the Roman Empire collapsed, or why the French Revolution happened, were different sorts of questions which lent themselves to different sorts of answers. In the first case, no set of causal laws could possibly supply an explanation, but in the latter two cases he did not see how answers based on 'reasons' could ever be adequate. 'No explanation of the persistence and change of a complex social system over time can be adequately provided by a story' (1980: 17). Because of Dunn's strong interest in the importance of history *and* sociology in understanding politics (Dunn, 1972: xiii), he could not see any way of abandoning some kind of commitment to causal laws (Dunn 1980: 20n). Rather, one needed accounts that stressed 'reasons' as well as 'causes', and this was particularly the case with the histories of ideas. These needed to explore the history of political arguments, the coherence of a person's ideas, though there was always the danger of imposing anachronistic assessments of rationality (Dunn, 1980: 26-7). Hence, they needed also to consider the history of political arguing, which looked at the explanations of

[2] He adds, however, that since we know nothing of Plato's emotional and cognitive states, were we precluded from understanding their meaning? 'Must it not in any case be possible to elicit the correct identification of the meaning from the text itself?' (Dunn, 1980: 23). See Bevir's (1999: 134-9) opposition to the idea that identifying what someone 'was doing' was part of the meaning of an utterance.

why particular arguments were made at a particular time. This ensured that the history of ideas could be a part of real social history.

These concerns with explanation in the human sciences were to become, if anything, more central in the following ten years. It is worth stressing that in this period Dunn had very little to say about the history of political thought. Since his conclusion – later retracted (Dunn, 1990: 9) – to his book on Locke had been that he could not 'conceive of constructing an analysis of any issue in contemporary political theory around the affirmation or negation of anything which Locke says about political matters' (Dunn, 1969: x), it seems possible that he did not see how historical reconstructions of the thought of philosophers was necessarily terribly illuminating about the present. In any event, he turned instead to empirical political history and social science. In 1972 he published *Modern Revolutions*, a series of case-studies of twentieth century revolutions designed to rebut prevailing social science explanations. We will return to the subject of revolution shortly. He was also pursuing an interest in the development of post-colonial West Africa. This resulted in a co-written study of a province of Ghana (Dunn and Robertson, 1973), based on detailed archival work and wide-ranging interviews, and an edited collection of case-studies of individual states (Dunn, 1978). Although by this point Dunn's interests were turning back to political theory, he had in the meantime ample occasion for thinking about problems of explanation in the social sciences.

Practising Social Science

These thoughts culminated in 'Practising history and social science on "realist" assumptions', published in 1978. Dunn by this point showed familiarity with recent post-analytic philosophy, and was aware of the attacks on traditional epistemology by those working in the pragmatist tradition, especially Quine, Davidson, Putnam, and Rorty. While he suggested that the implications of these arguments for social science were not yet fully clear (Dunn, 1980: 3-4, 109), what was apparent was that historicist and rationalist perspectives on cognition had been brought into closer harmony – part of the aim of the 1968 article. Certainly, he argued, any attempt to ground political theory in the analysis of supposedly 'timeless ethical concepts' was doomed to failure (1980: 3). The main aim of the essay was to consider what sort of knowledge of humans was possible, contrasting what might be called the interpretive or hermeneutic approach, which focused on human properties as humans understood them,

with the naturalist or positivist approach which 'laundered out' all the anthropocentric properties (1980: 6). He wanted to commit as far as possible to the former approach – which took very seriously human beliefs, and the beliefs embodied in action – but at the same time without abandoning an appreciation of 'a context of social causality' which set limits to what any individual human being could do (1980: 7).

Before exploring these arguments further, it will be useful to consider Macintyre's work on the philosophy of social science. The essays in *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (1971) and especially a further essay published in 1973 had a substantial influence on Dunn, judging by repeated references to these works. (There are also striking parallels with the arguments of Bevir and Rhodes, for instance in the understanding of institutions.) Although, as Turner (2005) shows, Macintyre switched over the course of the sixties from a strong commitment to explanation of meaningful action *solely* in terms of reasons to explanations which stressed both reasons *and* causes, his broader critique of positivist social science – for instance, behaviourism – remained strong. Many of his core themes come together in 'Ideology, Social Science and Revolution' (1973), which offered a sustained attack on the special claims to knowledge offered both by the positivist and by the ideologist. As with his earlier work, it begins with the need to identify an action – as distinct from a movement – by capturing 'the intention embodied in the action and the meaning the agent attaches to what he is doing' (1973: 323). Because of the social character of language, agents cannot characterise their actions in entirely egocentric ways – their descriptions will have some kind of implicit reference to social criteria: 'In order for his action to be what the agent takes it to be, it must be such that others can construe it in the same way' (1973: 324). In addition, since an agent's intentions were inseparable from his beliefs, actions presuppose a wider web of beliefs – for instance, taking a sheep to market presupposes a web of beliefs about economy and husbandry. For other agents to understand such actions requires some measure of shared beliefs, but because a great deal of divergence of belief can exist within a shared community, agents are oriented to making their actions intelligible, and so our beliefs about our actions always have some reference to what others believe about our actions and about our beliefs. Hence 'the' action cannot be identified independently of the beliefs both of the agent, and of other agents with whom he or she interacts. Drawing on Garfinkel and Goffman, Macintyre sees agents trying to understand the behaviour of others – including *their* attempts to understand him – within their own evolving scripts or 'theories' (1973: 325). Most of the

time agents are largely unaware of the complex and skilful negotiations which social life makes upon them – only in dramatically new or challenging situations do we suddenly become aware of these demands (1973: 327-8).

If this represents the social situation of ordinary agents, it had important epistemological consequences, notably the real challenges in determining the actions of other agents. It might be difficult to know which range of descriptions to apply to behaviour, and even if that was known, which of the possible range had primary status for the agent. Yet the task of imputing intentions to others cannot be evaded because we frame *our* 'intentions, purposes, attitudes, and emotions' in response to those we see in others (1973: 329). So, even though our ascriptions cannot be warranted by the evidence – and mistakes and misunderstandings will creep in – we nevertheless have to make do with them. Another difficulty was that this characterisation of social life compromised an agent's ability to predict the future. In a 'game theoretic' situation multiple agents were all trying to achieve their aims while recognising that 'no one agent can put a limit on the possibilities that may be opened by the reflections of other agents' (1973: 330). Even regularities, once observed, could be used to mislead. For these and other reasons agents cannot accurately predict the future. These characteristics were central to all social life. The result was that on the one hand humans cannot avoid relying upon the generalizations that help them fix the expectations of others, but that those very generalizations were constantly breaking down: 'we are all being surprised a great deal of the time' (1973: 332; also Macintyre, 1971: 243). The rest of the article argued that social scientists – whatever their positivist ambitions – could not transcend the epistemological limits of ordinary agents, but that all agents could try to avoid becoming victims of these limits by becoming more explicitly conscious of them – by recognising the concepts and categories we use in interpreting others and forming our own intentions (Macintyre, 1973: 336).

These themes are never far from Dunn's essay. He began by defining the core subject matter of human science as 'human acts taken under intentional descriptions, past, present and future, and the causes and consequences of such acts' (Dunn, 1980: 85). Throughout, he was critical of various styles of positivist social science. Like Macintyre and Taylor, he opposed behaviourism for its untenable claim that intentional categories be eliminated, and argued that even if they could such a science could not serve any humanly useful purpose (1980: 85-6).

He was also opposed to those social scientists who claimed that elements of an agent's self-description could be replaced with descriptions supplied by the observer – there were no criteria by which to judge such terms as superior, and in any case, Dunn continued, there were no viable laws of psychology or sociology which could explain motivation (1980: 104). Drawing on Macintyre (1973), he explained the difficulties of formulating laws in the human sciences. To be sure, one could identify past regularities, but if these were to explain outcomes they needed to take the form of conditional law-like generalisations, and he did not see any way criteria for counterfactual testing could be specified (Dunn, 1980: 100-1; see Macintyre, 1973: 333-4). Moreover, once regularities had been discovered they then become themselves elements open to manipulation – the theory contaminated the data. Hence, he argued, 'there are probably not any serious candidates for such law-like generalisations of any scope or interest in the more descriptively oriented social sciences' (Dunn, 1980: 101). Rather than concluding that social science was not possible – Macintyre's argument – a greater degree of cognitive humility was desirable on the part of social scientists.

Dunn's approach was 'strongly', even 'vigorously' hermeneutic (Dunn, 1980: 94, 104).[3] It took the beliefs and desires of agents seriously and argued that the history of such beings cannot deny their possession of intellect and cannot occur behind their backs (1980: 95). Much of the essay was a series of related reflections on how this could be made practicable to the enquirer and what its limits might be. To understand the action of a person would require a full account of the beliefs and desires the agent would have honestly and thoughtfully given of their action. There *might* be grounds for supplementing this account – for instance by reference to sociological or psychological considerations – so long as we could know that they were relevant but unmentioned aspects of the agent's actions. Dunn has in mind factors such as denial, self-deception, and rationalisation, as well as ideology and social determination of belief. All these might be relevant aspects of explanation, but only so long as they could be shown within an agent's 'own mapping of his "problem situation"'(1980: 105). Once we have the best description which an agent can offer, we *may* be able to

[3] See also his essay on Charles Taylor, where he suggests Taylor was incautious in advocating a *science* of interpretation, and that although he, Dunn, would incline on most occasions to the hermeneutic when offered a choice, this was for heuristic reasons, and he would expect to meet objections as they came rather than designing 'some comprehensive piece of pseudo-epistemological apparatus' which could rule out those objections in advance. 'Humanly speaking, the interpretative commitment is a good deal more enticing as a declaration of intention than it is as a claim to achievement'. (Dunn, 1990: 183-4).

enlighten the agent to himself by showing that his description was inaccurate or misleading, but what we 'cannot do is claim to *know* that we understand him or his action better than he does himself' (1980: 105).[4] The validity of any interpretation of an action will ultimately depend on the 'economy and accuracy' with which it handles 'the full text of the agent's description' (1980: 106).

Dunn countered various criticisms. One complaint might be that his account was highly individualist. He happily accepted this – he was opposed to those social holists who argued that social wholes could be understood without reference to the truth or falsity of any individual action. He also denied those who asserted that his argument committed him to the view that all statements about social wholes could be broken down into statements about individuals – i.e. he did not think his view committed him to methodological individualism. (These arguments are repeatedly stressed by Bevir and Rhodes as well.) This can be seen in his hermeneutic approach to institutions, which, again, draws on Macintyre.[5] In a favoured quotation, Macintyre suggested that 'it is an obvious truism that no institution or practice is what it is, or does what it does, independent of what anyone whatsoever thinks or feels about it. For institutions are always partially, even if to differing degrees, constituted by what certain people think or feel about them' (cited in Dunn, 1980: 89; Macintyre, 1971: 263). In practice it might be difficult to specify the boundary between those whose thoughts constituted the institution and those who were external to it – was the British state constituted by all its citizens, or only some of them? And, clearly, it was also partially constituted by citizens of other states. 'There is no such thing as the British state *tout court*', and this problem showed that one of the practical difficulties of social science was the 'gross vagueness' of many of its central terms (Dunn, 1980: 89).[6] Any regularities in the persistence of institutions were the result of the beliefs and actions of agents, and might cease to be regularities once they were uncovered as such (1980: 90, 94). But that did not mean that such

[4] The claim to know more than someone does about their own actions would consist of knowing it 'more deftly, honestly, realistically, dogmatically etc.' (Dunn, 1980:106). Talking to agents to encourage them to recognise the limits of the accounts they offered about their motivation is akin, Dunn suggests, to psychoanalysis. Compare the account suggested here with Bevir, 1999: chs 4, 7 which explains how we accommodate distortions such as deception, the unconscious, and irrationality in accounts of beliefs.

[5] See also Dunn, 1990: 167-170, a discussion of Roberto Unger's understanding of institutional plasticity.

[6] Compare Bevir and Rhodes: 2010.

regularities could be ignored – they confronted agents, and agents identified them as truths by which to guide their action. There might be 'few, if any' regularities which could not become redundant as a result of future beliefs, but 'one can hardly give a coherent account of the beliefs of an agent without making presumptions about the truth or falsity of any of his beliefs about social reality' (1980: 94). The argument might be individualist, but it need not be voluntarist – men made their own history, but 'some men make far more of their fair share of the history of others' (1980: 94). [205]

A further criticism might be that focusing on the beliefs and desires of agents does not account adequately for either causes or consequences. It might miss out the causal role of material factors which do not have any impact on consciousness, and it might misjudge the material factors which do appear. This was true enough: there was plenty of 'natural, non-intentional causality within human history and around human actions' and so all history could not be explained *solely* at the individual level – there were other entities necessary to populate the human sciences (1980: 85, 100). The sticking points, as we have seen, were attempts to specify psychological or sociological 'causes' which could not be connected in any way to human consciousness. Dunn attached great weight to consequences, especially unintended consequences, and an accurate assessment of them was a central part of his theory of judgment. But they did not raise any problems for a hermeneutic conception of human action because they were external matters of fact. It may be a stylistic feature of historical narrative to describe a set of actions as causing, say, the First World War, but this was not a license to replace the relevant agents' characterisation of their actions (1980: 105).[7]

The other difficulties concerned problems with characterising and describing human consciousness, and with providing criteria for describing meanings. The first problem was best side-stepped: even if one could offer some kind of full verbal transcript of the conscious experience of another person, it would not include experiences that could not be rendered in words, and would likely include all manner of sentences which we could make neither head nor tail of. Better, Dunn argued, to stick with intelligible descriptions of particular agents, as expressed in standard hermeneutic units: texts, speech acts and individual or collective actions (1980: 98-99). Even this less ambitious task would require enormous simplification to

[7] See Bevir, 1999: 316.

be manageable. The second more radical objection arose from Quine's arguments about the indeterminacy of translation. Because of his commitment to holism, such that the meaning of words depended on their place in the wider context of language, there could be no single manual for translating across languages. These difficulties applied not only to deeply alien cultures – radical translation – but also to those which might be comparatively similar. The difference between early modern and late modern notions of property was a case in point (1980: 96-7). These arguments could be seen to challenge the possibility of an interpretive human science, and Dunn's cautious response provides a good opportunity to summarise his broader themes.

These were sceptical but pragmatic. Dunn placed the beliefs and desires of agents centre-stage, but did not deny the difficulties this raised. There were no 'cheap ways' to the knowledge of others and the causes of their actions, but nor was the knowledge acquired more than provisional. The indeterminacy of translation posed real difficulties for the idea that meanings – the core subject matter of the human sciences – could be firmly characterised. But, on the other hand, the very existence of the term 'meaning' was significant: we can and do communicate, we can and do characterise what other agents mean (1980: 108-9). In a passage that echoes Macintyre's conclusions, Dunn argued that

> We all hold more or less well-justified beliefs about the beliefs and sentiments and practical situations of others. We all can and indeed *must* attempt to judge methodologically how it is sound to attribute beliefs or feelings to others. Within a common physical world we are all radical interpreters of one another, assigning beliefs, desires, intentions and meanings simultaneously to one another and trying to make sense of conduct by solving the resulting simultaneous equations. (1980: 107)

There were no methods which could provide guarantees against error, but the absence of such methods did not mean there was nothing true to be said (1980: 109).[8] What was needed – as with Macintyre – was greater awareness of the way we interpret ourselves and others, and something that Dunn thought akin to the principle of charity: 'If we claim to *know* about other men, we must try as best we can to give them what is their due, their right. This is a simple moral duty, not a guarantee of epistemological prowess' (1980: 110).

Agency, Revolution and Explanation

[8] See Bevir, 1999: 82-5 for criticisms of Skinner's logic of discovery.

These arguments provided the basis of Dunn's thoughts both about social explanation and political theory which we shall consider in turn. Throughout the 1970s his empirical work was in part a means of considering the nature of social explanation. In *Modern Revolutions* he examined eight case-studies as a way of showing the highly variable nature of 'revolution' – the concept was unlikely ever to be made a sufficiently stable category that could be susceptible to scientific analysis (Dunn, 1972: 226-8, 230, 241-3). In particular, he stressed that although revolutions were rarely the *intended* result of actual revolutionaries, he could not see how an explanation of their course could avoid 'an adequate account of the character of the wide variety of actions' that comprise them (1972: 232). The most ambitious attempt to provide a sociology of revolution came with Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (1979), which Dunn had positively refereed for Cambridge University Press, as well as offering advice on drafting the introduction.[9] It was, he believed, in many ways a powerful work which could also be read as staking bold claims for a new historical sociology. His lengthy review, however, brought out important areas of disagreement. He repeated his belief about the difficulty of finding appropriate criteria by which to define all revolutions, but noted that Skocpol began with theoretical stipulations which enabled her to focus on three complex instances of social revolution – France, Russia and China. As is well known, Skocpol's central innovation was to move away from the Marxist fixation with crises of production, and instead placed the state centrefold – revolutions were first and foremost crises of states. As well as the importance of class relations, she stressed the internal extractive and repressive power of the state and its external economic and military power. The latter focus on the world economy and the international state system were, for Dunn, major advances in understanding. Where he differed strongly was with her relentlessly structural approach which attempted 'to shrink the limits of the role of agency, human understanding and will, the cognitive and affective states of human beings' in favour of the 'overwhelming causal constraints imposed by objective conditions' (Dunn, 1985: 72). In sum, her models of state collapse refer as little as possible to human intentions or judgments.

Why? Dunn sees three reasons. First, the outcomes of revolutions are not intended by any agent, that is to say, what revolutionaries suppose themselves to be doing and what they are

[9] Skocpol, 1979: xvi. Dunn's was fulsome in his praise for Skocpol's earlier essays (e.g. Dunn, 1980: 320, 338) and contrasted his own 'somewhat crudely nominalist' work on revolutions with her 'very proper structural corrective' (Dunn, 1979: 86).

in fact doing overlap little. Second, the actual collapse of an *ancien régime* in any case was not caused by revolutionaries, and third, the real cause – the impact of foreign military and economic pressure – affected the options open to rulers and not revolutionaries. Dunn agrees with the first up to a point, but suggests that the understanding of revolutionaries had *some* causal consequence, and notes that even Skocpol accepts that there were differing options available in the process of reconstruction rather than a material determination of *the* option taken. On the second point, the collapse of a regime could not be understood 'independent of the acts of *any* social actors', and so the intentionality and judgment of state rulers was a relevant consideration. And finally, while the objective factors of revolutionary situations might originally be quite distinct from the practice of actual revolutionaries, by the twentieth century revolution has become an ongoing international phenomenon, and so the wider context of global revolutionaries now played 'a causal role in *creating* objective revolutionary situations' (1985: 75). What was really at stake, Dunn suggested, was the nature and purpose of sociology and explanation – revolutions pose in the starkest terms questions about how much choice humans have over their fate. While it was certainly possible to model the collapse of states from the outside – to see them as structural events beyond control, it was 'absurd' and even 'perverse' to think that the construction of new state powers in a revolution was 'a process external to human will or judgment' (1985: 76). Skocpol evades these hard questions, and adopts the structural terminology of possibilities, obstacles, options, imperatives, and impossibilities – but, as Dunn notes, even many of these terms cannot fully expel the 'flavour of choice' which they suggest (1985: 77).

However illuminating structural approaches to explanation were, they were 'causally inadequate' and, as we shall see, 'politically misleading' (Dunn, 1985: 5). Since the mid-seventies Dunn had become increasingly interested in the centrality of practical reason, and the counterfactuals it threw up. The key point to which he returned in a number of essays was that political judgment was about making choices and assessing possibilities. This did not deny that there were limits to actions, but it was rather a recognition that except in brutally determined situations there was always some kind of choice to be made (Dunn, 1980: 226n). 'The key truth about politics – morally, politically, theoretically – is always that matters could have been different.' (Dunn, 1978: 214). In order to understand what was actually the case at any given time, one needed to think about 'what *could*, under other specified circumstances, have been the case' (Dunn, 1979: 106). Thinking counterfactually was the

'central modality of political judgment' – it was to 'revel' in the potential openness of history, but at the same time not to be blind to its 'grubby rationality' (Dunn 1978: 215). In the case of *West African States*, for instance, Dunn argued that the most minute and detailed comparison of the structural properties of each would not be sufficient to explain their different political fortunes in the post-colonial period. It simply had to be recognised that 'political initiative, and skill, political lethargy and fecklessness' mattered, that the choices made by powerful players did have causal impact (1978: 212, 216). So, when thinking about the structural analysis of states one needed to be sure not to confuse what states *can* do with what they *must* do. An ineliminable feature of what they *can* do was human belief about what was possible, and those beliefs 'arise from historical experience and change with it' (Dunn, 1985: 77). The *presumed* causal properties of institutions – and the political strategies based on those presumptions – alter what both rulers and revolutionaries think it is rational to do. In political competition, 'the strategies of one set of competitors are necessarily predicated in some measure on their beliefs about the strategies of others' (1985: 77).[10] This reflexivity meant that revolutions varied over time, and that what might seem fixed structures in one situation, might not be so in the next. So rather than relying on structures alone to do the explanatory work, one had to examine why 'things as they are' in light of 'what factors under what circumstances' would have made them different (Dunn, 1984: 2).

The significance of these claims was developed much more fully by Dunn's colleague Geoffrey Hawthorn. His thinking about the role of counterfactuals – partly inspired by Dunn's work – began in 1979, and culminated in *Plausible Worlds* (1991). He started with the paradox that in the human sciences the more we multiply the causes and reasons we give to explain something, that is, the more we appear to be determinate in our explanations, the more we increase the possibilities that things could have been different, and so seem to decrease the power of our explanation. When considering 'causes', most of these turn out to have some measure of contingency, and, in any case, in the human sciences, many explanations turn *not* on causal connections but on practical reasonings. Hence there is enormous potential for counterfactual possibilities. The task of the enquirer, then, is to assess on a case by case basis those possibilities which were genuinely impossible and those which were plausible but not chosen (Hawthorn, 1991: 13-15). Some extended case-studies made

[10] Compare Macintyre, 1973; Craig, 2010.

the implications clearer. Take the course of plague and the levels of fertility in early modern Europe – these are typically seen as part of Braudel's *longue durée*, the biological regime of 'restrictions, obstacles, structures' which marked the impossible off from the possible (1991: 28). In fact, however, Hawthorn argues that things could have been different – in towns, at least, political choices might have better controlled the plague, and different choices of French policy towards Spain in the seventeenth century – with implications for taxation of the countryside – might have pressed less hard on rural fertility (1991: 79). Hence, doubts can be thrown on the distinction between structure and agency such that structure is not so much an unchangeable set of affairs, but simply a set of affairs that happened not to have changed much, but which could have been changed (1991: 79). An alternative example considers the politics of the division of Korea after 1945. This might be seen as a classic instance of *événementielle*, a situation where there was a high level of choice among those deciding US foreign policy. In fact, though, while the US could have acted differently in not occupying Korea in 1945, once there they could not have withdrawn without radically revising their reasons for being there (1991: 121). This latter point is key for Hawthorn – assessing plausible possibility requires careful consideration of the counterfactual. It had to start from 'particular agents in particular sets of circumstances as those agents and sets of circumstances actually were', rather than presuming situations or agents to be radically different from what they were (1991: 168). Ultimately, Hawthorn – like Dunn – was sceptical of the generalising claims of the social sciences. 'Practical reasoning is done by particular agents in the light of their particular experiences and the particular circumstances in which they find themselves. ... Possible reasonings for them are reasonings for them as them, there and then, reasonings that they can or could have made as those agents *from* where they are' (1991: 34-5). To generalise and abstract from this may be habitual in the social sciences, but it is also indeterminate, and at the extreme, empty (1991: 35). Hawthorn sympathised with Quine's arguments about the underdetermination of theory and indeterminacy of meaning, and doubted that there could ever be cumulative and convergent certainty – the supposed mark of knowledge – in the human sciences.

Being Realistic

Dunn's approach to political theory also emerges from his characterisation of practical reason and social life and was in marked opposition to the styles of political philosophy pursued in

the USA. As he repeatedly stated, drawing on Macintyre (1983) and Taylor (1983), the point of political theory was to understand 'what is really going on in society' (Dunn, 1984: 1; Dunn, 1985: 1). Unfortunately the historical division of labour within the field of politics had been 'disastrous', split, as it was, between a purely historicist history of political ideas, a political philosophy 'committed to political inconsequence by the self-conscious purity of its methods' and a political science 'ludicrously aping the sciences nature and uninformed by any coherent conception of political value' (Dunn 1985: 2). Dunn was keen to overcome these divisions and, in doing so, to rethink the way each proceeded. Hence, political theory needed to focus on three tasks. First it needed to understand what 'political structures, political institutions, and political relations are actually like at present' and consider 'what they prevent and what they bring about'. Second it needed to have some sense of how we might coherently want society to be, and third it ought to tell us what practically can be done to actualise and maintain such a society (Dunn, 1984: 1). Accordingly a core aspect of his political theory is understanding the here and now – and especially the sober assessment of the nature of global economic exchange and the character and power of modern states and the practical limits they impose to possibility (Dunn, 1985: 11). Any conception of politics had to consider 'realistically' how humans 'do in fact see and feel about each other in the settings in which they live and which they understand (and always will understand) so poorly' (1985: 11). It was difficult enough to know ourselves, and understanding others was an even harder task, so knowing how to act, when the consequences of our actions – intended, and all too often unintended – stretched far beyond our intentionality was daunting.

At heart, then, Dunn's is a theory of prudence or judgment – 'not a purely ideal value; it necessarily embodies a conception of how the world could, in historical reality and through real human agency, be changed to meet its requirements' (Dunn, 1985: 11; see Bourke and Geuss, 2009). The aim here is not to assess the validity of such a theory, but rather to draw attention to the way that it emerges out of the characterisation of the practical reason of agents, and the social situations in which they necessarily find themselves. It should now also be clear how this characterisation provides an inspiration for recent advocates of 'realism' in politics. This approach defines itself against various forms of moralism in politics – the 'ethics first' approach most conspicuously associated with Rawls. But advocates such as Dunn, Hawthorn, Williams and Geuss are *not* simply restating the realism familiar to students of international relations, who dismiss values, principles and ideals as 'mere window

dressing' and who believe that 'power and material self-interest are all that matter' (Geuss, 2010: 39). Geuss begins where Weber begins – that anyone who wanted 'tidy solutions' in politics had made a 'bad mistake in being born as a human being' (Geuss, 2010: 40). The real questions to ask were who has the power and motive to act, and what will the consequences be of adopting this, rather than another, course of action. In arguing that political philosophy be realist Geuss stresses four features. First, it should not begin with what people ought to value and desire but rather with the 'the way the social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances' (Geuss, 2008: 9). This does not mean humans lacks ideals and aspirations, but that those are only relevant insofar as they affect people's actual behaviour. Second, it must be recognised that politics is about action, motives and contexts and not merely about the truth or falsity of beliefs and propositions (2008: 11-13). Third, politics was always historically located – 'humans interacting in institutional contexts that change over time', meaning that excessive generalisation was unhelpful. Fourth, and as a consequence, Geuss sees politics as more like the exercise of a craft rather than the application of a theory. It required skill and judgment that did not readily lend itself to being codified. Taken together, this was what 'realism' meant.

By way of conclusion, we can return to the beginning. The father of political history – Thucydides – provides a useful way of commenting on my opening question about the relationship between political ideas and real politics. Although commonly seen as the originator of 'scientific' realism, this is misleading. While he did disdain explanations which placed excess weight on mythology and theology, he nevertheless thought that 'beliefs, attitudes, emotions, valuations, even superstitions' had to be taken 'very seriously indeed' if one wanted to know 'what really moves people to act, and what then happens to them and to others as a consequence of how they act' (Geuss, 2005: 226). In this sense 'ideas' – in the broadest understanding – do matter, but not necessarily in any high-minded way. Hawthorn's recent study of *Thucydides on Politics* (2014) brings this out well. The *History of the Peloponnesian War* managed to covey a strong sense that the people involved did not have a complete sense of what they were doing. Thucydides could do this because, like his contemporaries, he did not separate out motives, intentions, and actions, and was not tempted, like modern philosophers, to privilege the explanatory importance of 'reasoned intention over unreflected motive' (Hawthorn, 2014: 17). Politics was agonistic – intentions were not

always reasoned, and even when they were, the premises often were not; rhetoric matters but was rarely simply truthful or reasonable; events have causes, but they are invariably complex, and their effects blend with other effects; people are not bound to act in any one way (2014: 236). These insights remained relevant, Hawthorn suggested, for two reasons. First, irrespective of modern aspirations to global rationality and legality, it remains a world of political actors 'trying more or less imaginatively to achieve what they want to do through the exercise of one or another kind of power'. Whatever their virtues they were limited in mind and body, subject to the foibles of character, the force of habit, and the 'unforeseen and the unforeseeable' (2014: 238). If politics is only ever understood as made up of structural forces, or as driven by rational choices, or as expressions of a political culture, we will miss what any politician knows intuitively. Second, Thucydides challenges us with a 'moment of unillusion'. Ever since Plato, philosophers have turned aside from the messiness of real politics, and have instead conjured up visions of some kind of future in which humans might be fully at home. Thucydides instead encourages the thought that now, as then, we 'are naked in our political condition', and that the most appropriate response is to be 'as realistic as one can be about politics as politics' (2014: 239). Whether this is a congenial conclusion for political *theory*, it surely provides compelling reasons for the serious study of political *history* – not because simple 'lessons' or generalizable 'laws' can be unearthed, but because a greater appreciation of human action in diverse settings may enhance our understanding both of possibility and also of necessity.

Conclusion

Many of the foregoing arguments find ample resonance in the work of Bevir and Rhodes, but it may be useful to highlight four themes. First is the stress on the centrality of history. Dunn repeatedly argues the need for historical understanding, both in terms of the ancestry of the concepts that social scientists and political philosophers use, and also in terms of the actual social, economic, and political development of modern states. He believes that political history, political science, and political theory should be brought into a more fruitful dialogue with each other. Bevir also insists on the centrality of historicism, and argues that even those recent political scientists who have argued that 'history matters' still tend to cleave to modernist commitments to 'determinism, reification and foundationalism' (Bevir, 2010: 268; see also Adcock et al, 2007: 12-17, 284-9). In addition, he and Rhodes stress the importance

of the history of disciplines as a means of understanding and evaluating rival approaches. This point can be extended to points of contact across disciplines – indeed, fuller accounts of the historical development of the social and human sciences generally may enable stronger bridges between them to be built.

The second theme is the importance of agency and contingency. Dunn, Bevir and Rhodes all share a broadly individualistic stress on the integrity of the meanings offered by agents, and a dislike of holistic concepts that seem to bear no relation to those meanings. Bevir's account of situated agency stresses that 'social inheritances' can never fix the beliefs people might come to have nor 'the actions they might *try* to perform' (Bevir, 2010: 267, my emphasis). Dunn would agree – in this respect history is open and things *could* be different from how they are, but he would surely argue that *trying* to do something tells us little about *succeeding* in doing something. The irony that much of Dunn's work considers is that the personal experience of agency is not matched by its social reality.

This opens up the third point: the approach to explanation taken by Dunn, and developed by Hawthorn. In rejecting the strong sense of structural determinism they do not mean to deny that agents face seemingly insuperable obstacles to their intentions. Rather than characterise these as enduring 'structures', it is better to ask counter-factual questions: other things being equal, did the agents have a genuine range of actions they could implement or were they, to all practical purposes, constrained to do what they in fact did. Bevir and Rhodes do not generally talk in these terms, but they might argue that in order to explain any occurrence we need to know about the beliefs of particular agents, and the deeper traditions to which they belong. This is certainly part of the answer, but in many cases we will also need to know about the beliefs and actions of numerous other agents that may be relevant to the explanation.[11] This may be difficult enough when explaining, say, the decisions of a mundane academic committee, but when explaining a complex occurrence, such as the slide to war in 1914, we need to know about the febrile and fluid responses and counter-responses that characterise diverse agents in a state of high tension, and the extent to which their real options narrowed over time – as demonstrated in Christopher Clark's recent account, *The Sleepwalkers* (Clark, 2012: 361-4).

[11] And in the case of economic explanations, would the interpretive approach require us to map the beliefs and actions of an astronomically large number of agents?

This leads us to the fourth point, this time normative: the need for political judgment to be realistic. On the one hand, if the beliefs of agents are relatively open, then it becomes much harder for any of us to know – even supposed 'experts' – what someone else is going to say or do. But, on the other hand, the need to act requires some kind of practical knowledge of what is likely to happen, and that may require a measure of realism about what the world is really like – *at least right now* – and therefore prudence in acting in it. Bevir, who places hope in a pluralist and participatory democracy which enables citizens to 'develop voice, enter dialogues, and rule themselves' may find this an unduly pessimistic conclusion (Bevir 2010: 273). Dunn, however, might reply with the passage from Hobbes's *De Cive* which characterised the opportunity to show 'wisdome, knowledge, and eloquence, in deliberating matters of the greatest difficulty' as the dubious pleasure of seeing 'our wisdome undervalued before our own faces ... to hate, and to be hated, by reason of the disagreement of opinions, to lay open our secret Counsells, and advises to all, to no purpose, and without any benefit' (Dunn, 1990: 169).

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